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Who opposes government arts funding?

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Abstract. While the reasons for the controversy over public arts funding are well-understood, less clear is the set of variables that associates with strong opposition or support for arts subsidies. Using data from the General Social Survey, this paper builds a model to predict opposition based on ideological, economic, and demographic characteristics. The most important predictors of opposition are found to be political views, gender, income, private donations to the arts, and region of residence. The results in this paper suggest that the benefits of public arts funding accrue primarily to those in the highest income class, and that support varies somewhat according to the level of government providing the funding.

The far right is waging a war for the soul of America by making art a partisan issue. And by trying to cut these arts programs, which bring culture, education, and joy into the lives of ordinary Americans, they are hurting the very people they claim to represent.

Barbra Streisand, in a speech delivered at Harvard University (1995)

The National Endowment for the Arts has become a play thing ... for an elite group.

Newt Gingrich, in an interview on C-SPAN (Lamb, 1994)

1. Introduction

Public funding of the arts has often been a politically explosive issue. From the National Endowment for the Arts' (NEA) support of Andres Serrano's infamous photo "Piss Christ" in 1988 (Vance, 1992), to the furor over the Brooklyn Museum of Art's exhibition of the Virgin Mary decorated with elephant dung (Baitz, 1999), the right or responsibility of the public sector to subsidize and control art has been hotly contested. Beyond any fiscal issues involved, one asks whether the government should engage in activity that "shapes culture" or imposes an aesthetic climate (Kauffman, 1990). And

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even aside from “controversial” art, is the government properly-placed to pick winners among artists (Epstein, 1996)?

The emotional content of these questions tends to magnify the importance of government arts budgets, which are relatively small in dollar terms in the United States. For example, the NEA’s 1999 budget of \$98 million represents just 36 cents per American and less than one one-hundredth of one percent of the federal budget. One might compare this with, say, Sweden, where central government spending on the arts is about \$30 per capita (Throsby, 1994).

While the controversy over public arts subsidies is easy to grasp, less clear is the set of personal characteristics that associate with strong feelings on one side or the other. Samples of public opinion have painted general portraits of the supporters and opponents of this funding (American Council for the Arts, 1996), but few studies have attempted carefully to parse the separate influences of different characteristics in predicting beliefs. This paper does so, using responses to the 1998 General Social Survey. The empirical results are then used to build profiles of the supporters and opponents of public arts subsidies. Beyond uncovering several results that are at odds with much current arts policy about the identity of the recipients of public arts funding, these profiles should be useful for predicting constituent preferences in an attempt to form successful cultural policies.

The rest of this paper is comprised of four sections. First, I formalize the theory on this issue, focusing on the hypotheses about predictors of arts funding opposition that emerge from the literature. Second, I describe the data and analytic framework for testing these hypotheses. Third, I present the results of the testing and offer interpretation. Fourth, I build probabilistic demographic portraits of support and opposition to arts funding. Finally, I summarize the findings and conclusions.

2. The issue

Research to date on the determinants of opinions about arts subsidies can be classified into two broad categories. First, there are descriptions of public opinion surveys (*San Diego Union-Tribune*, 1988; National Research Center of the Arts, various years; *NBC News/Wall Street Journal*, 1995; Parachini, 1990). These usually feature a cursory analysis of data collected, with no attempt to separate out different determinants of public opinion, and hence have little predictive usefulness. Second, there is rhetorical analysis that argues that opposition to arts funding stems either entirely from a specific political viewpoint (Himmelstein and Zald, 1984) or proletarian ignorance (Hart, 1984). The one existing study that employs both data and models is Pettit and DiMaggio (1998) (hereafter referred to as P&D), which estimates

public opinion about the role of government in funding the arts using the data from four public opinion surveys ranging from 1974–1992.

In all of these studies (well-executed or otherwise), patterns emerge that help form a theoretical backdrop for the empirical analysis to come. Three categories of variables can be identified as having power in explaining opinions on arts funding: ideological, economic, and demographic.

For some Americans, the idea of government support for the arts is largely a matter of political ideology. In the same speech from which this paper's opening quote was extracted, Barbra Streisand asserts that "Liberals have ... always believed in public support for the arts". Making the same point in the academic literature, Himmelstein and Zald (1984) contend that in seeking to cut public arts agencies, conservatives simply aim to deprive a liberal cause of funds. In their words, "'Defunding the Left' and building a counterintellectual network ... are important for conservatives".

This last explanation uses an ideologically broad brush in its description of "conservatism". More compelling, perhaps, than rhetoric suggesting a right-wing consensus on cultural issues is the idea that "social conservatives" – those motivated primarily by traditional religious and moral values – tend to be most offended by (and thus most opposed to) publicly-funded art that has openly antireligious, violent, or sexual elements. Indeed, the famous outcry over the NEA-funded exhibit of Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photographs came largely from this group (Kauffman, 1990).

The idea that ideology is a prime predictor of attitudes is consistent with much existing theory on public opinion (e.g., Zaller, 1991; Neuman, 1990). Thus, we might begin a conceptual model with the observation that

$$y = y(i, \cdot), \text{ where} \quad (1)$$

y is a measure of opposition toward government arts funding, and i is a measure of political beliefs. If a higher i indicates more conservative views, we would expect that $\frac{\partial y}{\partial i} > 0$.

Microeconomic explanations for opposing arts subsidies exist as well. For example, an important predictor might be the propensity to donate individually to the arts. Given the supposed public goods character of the arts, private donors would support public subsidies in order to decrease the incidence of freeriding on their contributions. That is, freeriding should decrease the utility that private donations produce for the donor, tax-supported subsidies to the arts should decrease freeriding, and an individual's support for these subsidies should increase their likelihood of adoption. Formally,

$$\frac{\partial U}{\partial D} = U_D[D, G(y(D, \cdot))], \text{ where} \quad (2)$$

D is the level of private donations, G is the level of government funding, and U is the individual's utility function. We expect that $\frac{\partial y}{\partial D} < 0$.¹

Related to this last point, attendance at arts events should increase human capital and thus raise the marginal utility of the arts (Brooks, 1997). This should stifle opposition to government subsidies, as people become indirect recipients of these subsidies (to the extent that they result in demand-side benefits). That is,

$$G = G[y(U_A(A), \cdot)], \text{ where} \quad (3)$$

A is the amount of arts consumed, and U_A is the individual's marginal utility of arts attendance. Since $\frac{\partial y}{\partial U_A} < 0$ and $\frac{dU_A}{dA} = \frac{d^2U}{dA^2} > 0$, we expect that $\frac{\partial y}{\partial A} < 0$.

Combining the information in equations (1), (2), and (3), we can create a simplified model of opposition to arts funding, which will form the basis for the empirics in the next section.

$$y = y(i, D, A, \mathbf{x}), \text{ where} \quad (4)$$

\mathbf{x} is a vector of demographic controls.

As to some of the specific elements of \mathbf{x} , several demographic explanations for opposition to arts funding are common in the literature, although occasionally they are incompatible with one another. Most notably, while Ms. Streisand suggests in the opening quote that arts subsidies are a form of aid to the poor, the accompanying position from Mr. Gingrich is that these programs are merely welfare for the rich. Another variable one suspects might be influential is gender, as we often hear that women are more sympathetic to such government programs than men (DiMaggio and Pettit, 1999). As well, it is commonly believed that the fine and performing arts are especially popular among highly-educated or non-religious people (Jarvik, 1997).

3. Data and models

To test the hypotheses summarized in equation (4), I use the General Social Survey (GSS) data collected in 1998.² The GSS, which is administered by the National Opinion Research Center (Davis et al., 1999), is designed to provide a random sample of responses by more than 2,500 interviewees to different subsets of about 4,000 questions.

Since y can be stated dichotomously – where 1 denotes the opinion that the government should fund the arts less than at present and 0 if otherwise, for example – equation (1) can be estimated using a binary choice model. There is no especially intuitive argument as to why y might not be distributed normally (conditional on the right-hand side variables), and it is convenient

Table 1. Dependent variables denoting support and opposition to government arts funding

Variable	Description
FUNDLESS	1 = the government spends too much on the arts at present, 0 = the government spends too little or the right amount
FEDFUND	1 = the federal government should provide financial assistance to arts firms in need, 0 = the federal government should not provide this assistance
STATEFUND	1 = state government should provide financial assistance to arts firms in need, 0 = state government should not provide this assistance
LOCALFUND	1 = local government should provide financial assistance to arts firms in need, 0 = local government should not provide this assistance

to assume that it follows a logistic distribution. Thus, I estimate equation (1) with a Logit model.

Several variables from the GSS are used to measure y in the next section, and are summarized in Table 1.

FUNDLESS is the most general variable measuring support or opposition to arts funding and I will use it to build the profiles in a later section. The other variables are designed to net out differences in feelings about government's role at different levels.

The independent variables used to operationalize the right-hand side of equation (1) are summarized in Table 2. The elements of x are selected to test the hypotheses described in the last section as well as for comparability with P&D.

The summary statistics for these variables is contained in Table 3, as well as the cross-tabulation of the dependent variables with FUNDLESS.

P&D's models include the measures for sex, age, income, education, race, marital status, religion, and attendance at arts events. However, they do not include three variables contained here: donations to the arts, political ideology, and region, all of which prove important in explanatory power in my models. Another important difference is that in my estimations, I skip all observations in which an answer of "Don't know" was given for any variable (as opposed to grouping them in the reference groups), in an attempt to keep the explanatory variables as clean as possible, and thus add fidelity to the portraits I build in a later section.

Table 2. Independent variables predicting support and opposition to government arts funding

Variable	Description
MALE	1 = respondent is male, 0 = respondent is female
AGE	respondent's age at the time of the survey
MARRIED	1 = respondent is married, 0 = respondent is not married
HS ^a	1 = respondent holds high school diploma, 0 = otherwise
COLLEGE ^a	1 = respondent holds college degree, 0 = otherwise
GRAD ^a	1 = respondent holds graduate degree, 0 = otherwise
WHITE ^b	1 = respondent is white, 0 = otherwise
BLACK ^b	1 = respondent is black, 0 = otherwise
30<INCOME ≤60 ^c	1 = respondent earns \$30–60 thousand per year, 0 = otherwise
60<INCOME ≤90 ^c	1 = respondent earns \$60–90 thousand per year, 0 = otherwise
INCOME>90 ^c	1 = respondent earns over \$90 thousand per year, 0 = otherwise
EAST ^d	1 = residence on U.S. east coast, 0 otherwise
MIDWEST ^d	1 = residence in midwest states, 0 otherwise
SOUTH ^d	1 = residence in southern states, 0 otherwise
LIBERAL ^e	1 = respondent describes self as “liberal” or “extremely liberal”, 0 = otherwise
CONSERVATIVE ^e	1 = respondent describes self as “conservative” or “extremely conservative”, 0 = otherwise
GIVETOARTS	1 = respondent donated money to the arts in the last year, 0 = respondent did not donate
ATTEND	1 = respondent attended an arts event (visited a museum or attended a concert or other performing arts event) in the past year, 0 = respondent did not attend an arts event
CHRISTIAN	1 = respondent is a Christian, 0 = respondent is not a Christian

^a Reference group is no high school diploma.

^b Reference group is other than white or black.

^c Reference group is income ≤ \$30 thousand.

^d Reference group is residence in western states. These regions match the U.S. Census definitions.

^e Reference group is “moderate”.

4. Results and interpretation

Table 4 gives the results of the Logit regressions outlined above.

Of the central hypotheses from the structural model, we see that two are supported by the data while one is not. First, the coefficients on LIBERAL and CONSERVATIVE are significant and have the expected signs. Ideology does indeed explain a substantial amount of opposition to arts subsidies.

Table 3. Summary statistics for GSS data

Variable	N	Percent of observations where variable = 1	Pr[FUNDLESS =1 variable = 1	Pr[FUNDLESS =1 variable = 0
FUNDLESS	1,203	0.22	1.00	0.00
FEDFUND	1,278	0.50	0.04	0.17
STATEFUND	1,271	0.61	0.07	0.14
LOCALFUND	1,273	0.62	0.08	0.12
MALE	2,832	0.44	0.12	0.10
MARRIED	2,832	0.48	0.12	0.11
HS	2,820	0.57	0.13	0.09
COLLEGE	2,820	0.15	0.02	0.20
GRAD	2,820	0.11	0.02	0.20
WHITE	2,832	0.79	0.18	0.40
BLACK	2,832	0.14	0.03	0.20
30<INCOME≤60	1,849	0.30	0.04	0.09
60<INCOME≤90	1,849	0.05	0.01	0.13
INCOME>90	1,849	0.03	0.002	0.13
EAST	2,832	0.20	0.04	0.19
MIDWEST	2,832	0.25	0.05	0.17
SOUTH	2,832	0.25	0.07	0.16
LIBERAL	2,691	0.16	0.02	0.20
CONSERVATIVE	2,691	0.19	0.07	0.15
GIVETOARTS	712	0.43	0.03	0.07
ATTEND	1,435	0.07	0.01	0.21
CHRISTIAN	2,797	0.81	0.20	0.02

Notes: (1) The only nondichotomous variable in these data was AGE: N = 2,832; mean = 46; median = 42; standard deviation = 17; minimum value = 18; maximum value = 99. (2) Differences in the number of observations for different variables owe to the fact that not all questions were asked of all respondents in the GSS.

Second, the negative, significant coefficient on GIVETOARTS confirms the presence of a freeriding effect. People who donate to the arts privately seem to favor broader participation of the population through mandatory tax-based giving. Third, while ATTEND has the expected sign, it is not significant. This weakens support for the human capital argument about support for arts funding.

Table 4. Regression results: Predictions of the likelihood of favoring lower government arts subsidies than at present

Independent	Dependent variable							
	FUNDLESS		FEDFUND		STATEFUND		LOCALFUND	
	Coef.	Stand. error	Coef.	Stand. error	Coef.	Stand. error	Coef.	Stand. error
MALE	1.09***	0.28	-0.03	0.21	-0.44**	0.21	-0.36*	0.21
AGE	0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01
MARRIED	-0.10	0.27	-0.06	0.20	0.15	0.20	0.34	0.21
HS	0.19	0.51	0.11	0.40	0.21	0.40	0.36	0.41
COLLEGE	-0.03	0.58	0.61	0.45	0.55	0.45	1.24***	0.47
GRAD	0.22	0.61	0.61	0.46	0.48	0.47	0.82*	0.48
WHITE	-0.03	0.64	-0.12	0.43	-0.34	0.47	0.42	0.43
BLACK	-0.22	0.75	0.32	0.51	-0.05	0.55	0.62	0.52
30<INCOME≤60	-0.38	0.30	-0.57***	0.23	-0.27	0.22	-0.21	0.23
60<INCOME≤90	-0.60	0.55	-0.19	0.39	0.01	0.40	-0.34	0.41
INCOME>90	-1.88**	0.83	-0.42	0.47	0.25	0.50	-0.52	0.50
EAST	-0.34	0.42	0.05	0.29	0.09	0.30	-0.76***	0.30
MIDWEST	-0.79**	0.38	-0.34	0.26	-0.19	0.27	-0.45*	0.28
SOUTH	-0.15	0.35	-0.33	0.27	-0.14	0.27	-0.12	0.28
LIBERAL	-0.95*	0.51	0.63**	0.27	0.27	0.28	0.13	0.28
CONSERVATIVE	1.30***	0.29	-0.51*	0.27	-0.65***	0.26	-0.66***	0.27
GIVETOARTS	-0.71***	0.28	0.70***	0.20	0.38*	0.20	0.76***	0.21
ATTEND	-0.32	0.59	0.18	0.36	0.42	0.39	0.03	0.39
CHRISTIAN	0.48	0.41	-0.42	0.26	-0.04	0.27	-0.12	0.28
CONSTANT	-2.19**	0.95	0.49	0.69	0.80	0.72	-0.39	0.71
Cragg-Uhler R ²		.24		.16		.10		.13
Pr[y=1]		.22		.50		.61		.62
Pr[predicted y=1 y = 1]		.34		.57		.66		.69
Likelihood ratio test	79.26***		61.90***		36.76***		50.10***	
N	486		500		505		504	

Notes: * indicates coefficient is significant at $\alpha = .10$. ** indicates coefficient is significant at $\alpha = .05$. *** indicates coefficient is significant at $\alpha = .01$.

Among the other variables in Table 4, especially notable is the negative, significant coefficient on INCOME >90, indicating that those in the highest income class are most likely to support public arts funding, holding all else constant. If the wealthy are not systematically different than others in their opinion about the public benefits of the subsidized arts, this coefficient may be taken to mean that members of this income class derive more in *private* benefits from this funding than do people in other classes. This adds legitimacy to the position that government arts funding, as currently administered, is primarily a public subsidy to the rich.

Perhaps contrary to initial expectations, MIDWEST is significantly negative, while EAST is insignificant. On reflection, however, this is not inconsistent with observed sociopolitical attitudes in the Midwest, specifically those described in the literature on "Midwestern Progressivism" (Nye, 1951). This work acknowledges a mistrust of privileged "Eastern elites" and a reliance on middle-class values, but at the same time stresses an openness to social reforms and "progressive" government activities such as public art (Horne, 1991). Thus, while controversies exist over funding projects such as the 1990 exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs at Cincinnati's Community Arts Center, government subsidized art continues to flourish in these communities (*The Economist*, 1990).

The coefficient on MALE is positive and significant, indicating that men are more likely than women to oppose government arts subsidies. This supports the priors expressed earlier. Beyond this result, however, my results are not particularly consistent with P&D. First, age, race, and religion are all significant variables for P&D, but they are not significant here. An explanation for this discrepancy (consistent with recent literature on this topic) is that my model estimates political ideology in LIBERAL and CONSERVATIVE, which in turn captures some of the explanatory power in the demographic variables that were significant in P&D (Hunter, 1991). Second, attendance at arts events (ATTEND) is not significant here, while it is in P&D. This is harder to explain, except for the possibility that attendance is actually somewhat related to funding attitudes through giving to the arts. This hypothesis is reinforced by the mild but significant correlation (.12) between giving and attendance.

The remaining regressions shed light on the way attitudes toward government's involvement in the arts vary according to the level of government. The results are broadly consistent with the first regression, which asked about "government" without differentiating between level. This consistency is especially notable in the case of the two most important variables in this study: political ideology and giving to the arts. Two minor differences are worth noting, however. First, $30 < \text{INCOME} \leq 60$ has a significantly negative effect

on FEDFUND; in other words, middle class respondents are less likely than other groups to favor federal arts funding. Second, college and graduate education has a positive effect on the disposition toward local funding, but not on funding at other levels of government. This last effect might be explained by noting that local public funding often has a particularly visible presence in arts events of all types (and thus creates a positive image), and education levels are a major predictor of attendance at arts events.³

5. Portraits

Using the parameter estimates from Table 4, I now build portraits of support and opposition to public arts funding. I focus specifically on the variables that are significant in the first regression: gender, membership in the highest income class, residence in the Midwest, political ideology, and private donations to the arts. I hold all the nonsignificant variables at their mean values (except where the categories are mutually exclusive).

A sampling of portraits, from highest to lowest probability, are listed in Table 5. The highest predicted probability of opposition to arts subsidies is 0.68. This refers to a male earning less than \$90 thousand per year, not from the Midwest, a self-described conservative, who does not donate to the arts privately. If we define this as the opponent case, the most obvious contrast would be with the proponent case, or the last entry in the table, which has less than a 1% chance of this opposition. This is a portrait of a woman earning over \$90 thousand, from the Midwest, who is a self-described liberal and donates to the arts. Interesting intermediate cases fall between these two levels. Examples I have included in the table are male and female political moderates; a conservative, upper-class male arts donor; a moderate, upper-class, female arts donor; and a wealthy, male liberal.

It is useful to perform sensitivity analysis with respect to each of the parameters. Figure 1 illustrates the changes to the probability of opposition as each of the significant variables is toggled *individually* off a baseline case, in which the probability of opposing subsidies is set at 0.22, the observed sample mean.⁴ These cases are also contrasted with the “opponent” and “proponent” cases.

Moving from a “moderate” to “conservative” political ideology results alone in a 29-point increase in this probability on average, while moving to “liberal” leads to an 12-point drop. If the respondent is male, this by itself accounts on average for a 24-point increase. Giving to the arts privately reduces the probability by 10 points, while membership in the highest income bracket is associated with a 18-point drop. Residence in the Midwest (compared with the reference region – West) accounts for a 11-point drop.

Table 5. Selected probabilities of stating that government should give less to the arts than at present

Probability	Gender	Income over \$90K?*	From Midwest	Ideology	Donates to the arts?
0.681	Male	No	No	Conservative	No
0.368	Male	No	No	Moderate	No
0.190	Male	Yes	No	Conservative	Yes
0.164	Female	No	No	Moderate	No
0.048	Male	Yes	No	Liberal	No
0.021	Female	Yes	No	Moderate	Yes
0.004	Female	Yes	Yes	Liberal	Yes

* Where “NO”, the variable used pertains to the category ($30 < \text{INCOME} = 60$) containing U.S. median household income.

** Where “NO”, the value used pertains to the reference group (WEST).

Notes: Education is held at HS=1, which pertains to the largest part (57%) of the sample. Race is held at WHITE=1 (79% of the sample).

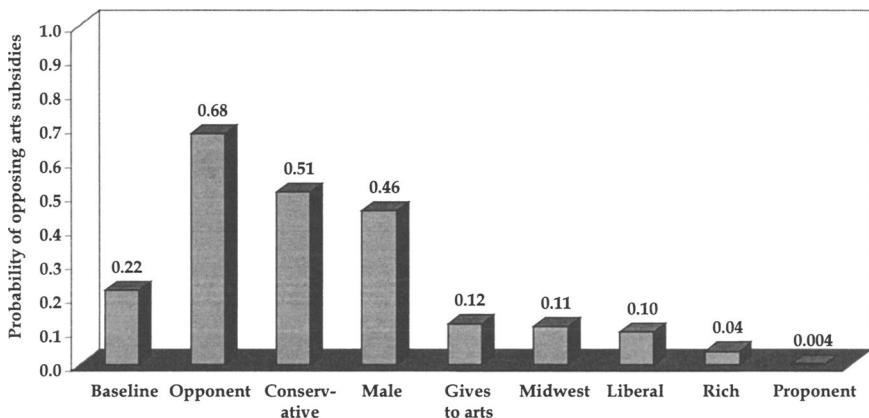


Figure 1. Probabilities of opposition to government arts funding.

6. Conclusion

Several personal characteristics are commonly associated with strong opposition or support for public arts subsidies. These include a self-described conservative political ideology, the propensity to donate to the arts individually, and a number of demographic variables, such as sex, race, income, education, and religion.

In this paper I have built models to test the importance of these hypothesized explanatory variables and have fit these models using data from the

General Social Survey. These models are more detailed than those that have preceded them in the literature, and they yield different results. I found six variables to be significant in their association with opposition to government arts funding. High income was negatively associated with this opposition; a self-described “conservative” ideology affected opposition positively, while a “liberal” ideology had the opposite effect; there was a positive association between males and opposition; and private donations to the arts predicted less opposition, as did residence in the Midwest.

Under the Logit model specification, the highest predicted probability of opposition to arts subsidies was 0.68. This refers to a male earning less than \$90 thousand per year, not from the Midwest, a self-described conservative, who does not donate to the arts privately. On the other hand, the predicted probability of opposition by a woman from the Midwest in the highest income bracket, who donates to the arts and self-identifies as “liberal”, is statistically indistinguishable from zero.

Notes

1. Note that by the earlier definition, y is a measure of opposition, not support.
2. 1998 was the first year in which the questions about government support for the arts were asked.
3. For example, regressing attendance on all of the demographic variables in this study, the coefficients on COLLEGE and GRAD are by far the largest and most significant.
4. These probabilities were estimated by using the logistic function $\ln\left(\frac{p}{1-p}\right) = \beta_1 x_1 + \theta$, where $\theta = \ln\left(\frac{.22}{1-.22}\right) - \beta_1 x_1 \cdot x_1 = \{0, 1\}$ denotes the values of the dichotomous exogenous variables of interest and each β_1 is estimated in the logit regression.

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